

Learning Communities

An Emerging Phenomenon

Ellen Galinsky

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- Thirty years ago, 10 percent of California's general revenue fund went to higher education and 3 percent to prisons. Today, 8 percent goes to higher education and nearly 11 percent to prisons.
- Seventy-five percent of young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot enlist in the military today because they haven't graduated from high school, have a criminal record, or are physically unfit.

If the United States is to regain its position in the world and become "us" again, solutions need to begin with education. And slowly but increasingly, those proposing educational solutions are becoming aware that education doesn't begin in grade school or in high school or in higher education; it must include a firm and continuous foundation in the early years of life. Educational solutions are the focus of this issue of *Young Children* and its cluster of articles about Curriculum, Assessment, and Teaching: Putting It All Together.

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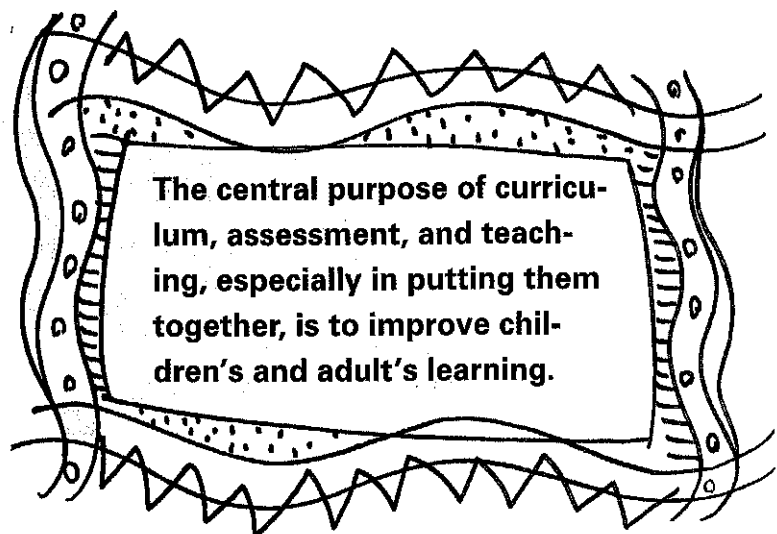
Ellen Galinsky, president and cofounder of Families and Work Institute, helped establish the field of work and family life while at Bank Street College of Education, where she was a faculty member for 25 years. She is the author of *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* and numerous other books, reports, and journal articles. Ellen is a past president of NAEYC. egalinsky@familiesandwork.org

Photos © Ellen B. Senisi.

National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, from which these articles are drawn. My frustration is with the debates about curriculum, assessment, and teaching, as they typically unfold. I am frustrated that these debates don't emphasize enough the *purpose* of curriculum, assessment, and teaching—that at their core, these are strategies for promoting *learning*.

I suspect that my frustration is shared, because there is a spontaneous movement in the United States to refocus on learning. For those familiar with the term *smart mobs*, the concept promulgated by Howard Rheingold in his 2002 book of the same name, this is a smart mobs movement. Rheingold's theory is that smart mobs—groups that coalesce to bring about change—exist at the nexus of new communication technology. They emerge when new technology for communication and computing amplify people's desire for change and for cooperation, though the calls-to-action can be for positive or negative purposes. On a grand scale, think of the Arab Spring movement in support of democracy or the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Of special concern to us as educators, consider the genuine hunger among the education community for refocusing on learning—for remembering that the central purpose of curriculum, assessment, and teaching, especially in putting them together, is to improve children's and adult's learning.



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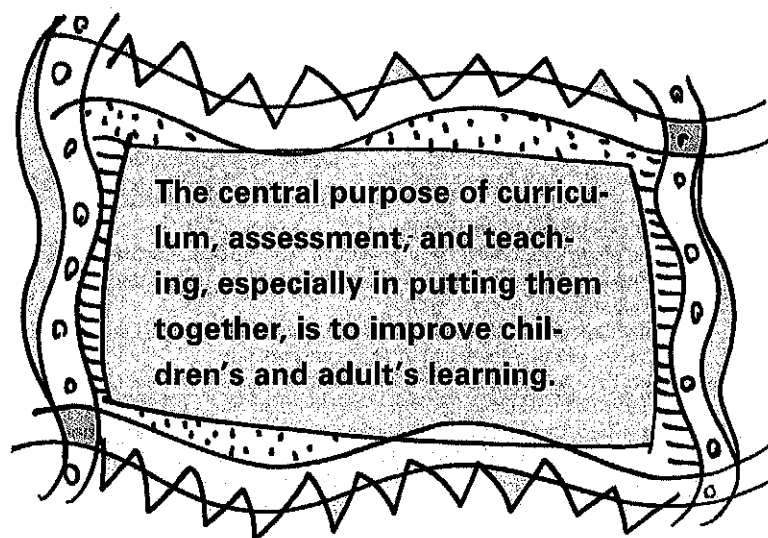
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Examples of this came to me via modern communication media and are being furthered through such technology. Here is the story.

A learning journey— Discovering learning communities

Soon after publication of my book *Mind in the Making* (MITM) in 2010, I received a dramatic number of Google alerts about messages using my name or the book's title. They were notices about discussion groups that were convening around the book, and the groups were posting announcements of these gatherings on the Internet. To list a few: a state department of education was holding a webinar; a college was hosting a symposium; a parent education program was holding monthly discussions about each chapter; a school-district book club was reading a chapter a month and discussing implementation of the ideas; and so on.

Publishing a book is like dropping that book into a dark sea to sink or swim. Rarely does the author have glimpses of where the book goes or whom it touches. Publishing MITM in the information age has been a totally new experience for me. Reading the cumulative Google alerts, I sensed that *Mind in the Making* was bringing together people who don't usually work together. Principals and early childhood directors; family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers and center-based teachers; parents and teachers—adults from across our typical systems divide were coming together. Furthermore, surprising groups, such as families in homeless shelters and teen parents, were reading the book. I came to think of these groups as learning communities.

A learning community is a group of people who come together to learn with and from each other and then seek to act on what they learn. Their reason for being is ongoing inquiry for the sake of improvement.

My inner researcher was very curious. At Families and Work Institute, we wanted to find out more and perhaps connect the learning communities with each other to extend the learning. Thanks to the Kellogg Foundation, we were able to provide financial support to some of the learning communities. Our intent was to support groups that brought together individuals who might not otherwise have joined together in the birth-through-8 continuum, who had strategies for continuing their work, and who were willing to share their lessons learned and the materials they created. They were free to propose any activities they wished.

Offering mini-grants of up to \$5,000, Families and Work Institute received 74 applications from 28 states and the District of Columbia. In reading the applications, we began to get to know the groups—those we funded, those we didn't fund, and those we have heard about more recently. We noted that these learning communities share a number of characteristics—we count 10. In fact, they do put curriculum, assessment, and teaching together in some new ways. And first and foremost, they go back to the core purpose of curriculum, assessment, and teaching—recognizing them as strategies for learning. They put learning first.

Common characteristics of learning communities

Here are the 10 features most of the *Mind in the Making* learning communities have in common, with examples for each.

1. Learning communities have the power to bring new players together.

The STEPS: Birth-8 Professional Development Project of the New York City Early Childhood Professional Development Institute is housed at City University of New York. The first group in the project's learning community included early childhood center directors and elementary school principals in the South Bronx. Each month, these leaders focused on a chapter of *Mind in the Making*. They watched the video clips in the book's DVD or visited a member's school. They observed classrooms, viewing them through the lens of the current chapter reading. Following each observation, they talked about what they saw and, based on the readings, offered suggestions to strengthen teaching and learning in that school. The discussions included "takeaways"—ideas leaders could bring back to their staff to implement.

The second group comprised six cohorts of teachers of toddlers through grade 3 children from child development centers and public schools. In addition to conversations



about each chapter in the book, this group's agenda included intensive, individual, on-site mentoring and coaching by the initiative's designated community consultants. Each of the four community consultants was assigned participants from both the child development centers and public schools to help facilitate the continuum and extend concept development.

The initiative's director, Dana Benzo, finds that *Mind in the Making* provides a framework that both leaders and teachers can use in addressing best practices in child development and learning. The framework redirects the emphasis toward the skills children need to succeed in school and in life. Before this effort, Benzo says, not all the principals were knowledgeable about the development of young children. But by the time the group reached the chapter about critical thinking (the fifth skill described in the book), the principals had become very interested in early childhood development and returned to and reviewed the previous life skills with real enthusiasm.

Working within elementary schools is a common theme among the learning communities. The goal of the Albuquerque (New Mexico) Public Schools (APS) is to create learning communities throughout the city's elementary schools. Heather Vaughn, coordinator of the APS Early Childhood Office, brought *Mind in the Making* to early childhood teacher-leaders across the school district. Teacher-leaders are chosen to be internal advocates for early childhood education in their school. Through district professional development, the Albuquerque teacher-leaders used *Mind in the Making* to develop their

own curriculum for teacher training. Following the *Mind in the Making* course, they took the book back to their schools and have been conducting their own professional learning communities for staff and information sessions for families. There is also a book study group with elementary school principals in the district. Vaughn says that reading and discussing *Mind in the Making* levels the playing field for teachers, principals, and parents—everyone is learning together.

2. Learning communities do not shy away from reaching those who are most in need.

The learning community of the Center for Innovation and Resources, in Rohnert Park, California, helps parents of young children with disabilities and their service providers build life skills based on the concepts in *Mind in the Making*. Services include early childhood care and education, early intervention, early childhood special education, and more.

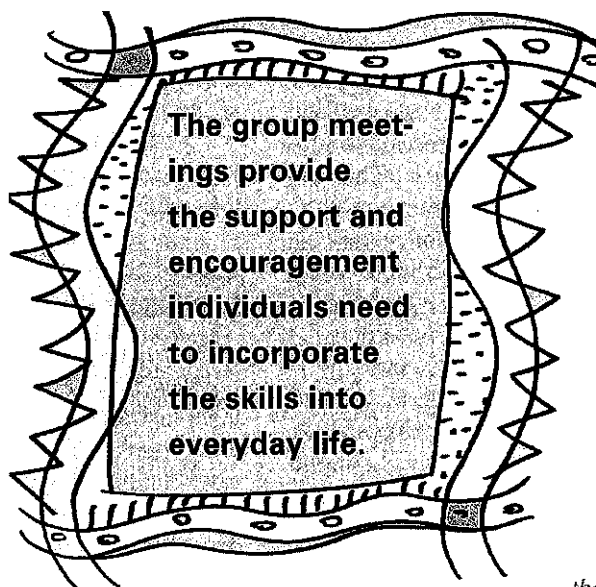
The center struggled initially with creating the group of service providers, because a number of them were facing significant health and family issues. Now that the group has coalesced, they are forming a virtual book club, reading *Mind in the Making* and discussing it via technology (teleconferencing and using Posterous, a collaborative blogging platform) to focus on fostering life skills in children with disabilities. Some of the members are facilitating face-to-

face book clubs in their own communities. For example, one member has taken MITM to a group of parents with children who were premature babies. All will develop action plans for incorporating the book's concepts into their work in ways that best suit their context.

The Retreat, a domestic violence organization in Easthampton, New York, is another example. It has recruited clients from its 24-hour safe-haven shelter for women and children to participate in a *Mind in the Making* group. The group

of women clients meets in eight ses-

sions, and discussions focus on fostering personal development using MITM's seven essential life skills. Participants report finding it helpful to discuss the skills with peers and trained professionals. The group meetings provide the support and encouragement individuals need to incorporate the skills into everyday life. Playing the suggested games and activities has enhanced the experience by show-





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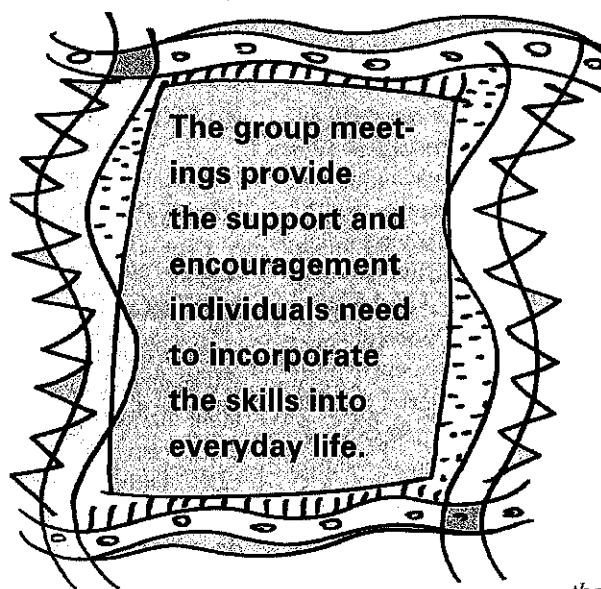
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ing concrete ways to use each skill. The games also offer participants a chance to laugh and have fun during a very stressful period in their lives.

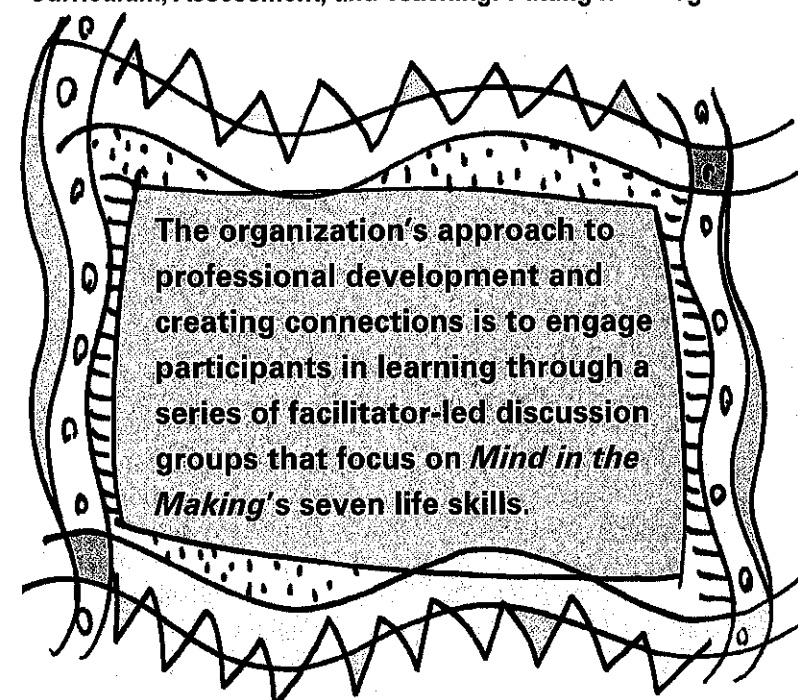
I wondered whether focusing on life skills during such a stressful time would be effective. But Retreat staff report that it is a good time to learn. The sessions afford participants an opportunity not only to obtain new information, but also to be empowered by internalizing skills that can help them cope in a difficult home situation. They say that "clients are finding their own voices and encouraging others to do the same."

3. Members of learning communities focus on learning from and with each other. They have replaced the notion of learning from an expert ("the sage on stage") with a belief that there is expertise in everyone.

Arizona AEYC (AzAEYC) uses this approach in its mentoring initiative. When an NAEYC Innovation Grant opportunity arose, Naomi Karp, then president of AzAEYC, saw it as a way to get early childhood leaders and emerging professionals to learn together and examine their capacities in seven essential skill areas outlined in *Mind in the Making*. They could then provide classroom experiences and activities to help young children develop these same life skills.

Ida Rose Florez of Arizona State University, an AzAEYC board member who, with several other board members, leads the mentoring initiative, says that the goal is to have veteran early childhood professionals personally mentor early career professionals. Each local AEYC Affiliate in Arizona is establishing a learning community consisting

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of veteran AzAEYC mentors with two to five early-career participants each who are enrolled in an early childhood degree program or have graduated in the past two years.

Learning communities meet monthly (in person or by teleconference). Mentors facilitate discussions about using *Mind in the Making* concepts to help children develop essential life skills. Each participant is developing an outreach project using MITM and AzAEYC materials. The project may include colleagues or parents. In addition to helping the participants in their groups engage with MITM concepts, the learning community must build AzAEYC awareness and membership interest.

4. Learning communities focus on active learning that is experiential and includes engaging participants in a process of self-reflection and self-discovery, leading toward action.

The Omaha AEYC's community-based quality-improvement initiative aims to intentionally connect programs serving infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and children in the early elementary school grades in the public and private sectors. The organization's approach to professional development and creating connections is to engage participants in learning through a series of facilitator-led discussion groups that focus on *Mind in the Making*'s seven life skills. Discussions will center on ways to learn about learning and foster child development through techniques in the book. Sessions will also encourage use of the learning techniques by partner organizations and advocate for their use throughout the community.



The Omaha Children's Museum, one of the partners in the initiative, will host a discussion group to generate ideas for "parent nudging" cards, to be located throughout the museum. The cards will help parents take an active role in their children's play and nudge families to foster their children's life skills.

5. Learning communities are using new media in creative ways.

The joint project of the Minnesota AEYC (MnAEYC) and the Minnesota School-Age Care Alliance (MnSACA), based in St. Paul, is a good example of the use of new media. Sharon Bergen, executive director of both organizations, says the goal is to create a learning community across programs that will be a model for future learning communities around the book. As such, their use of new technology and communication tools is critical to a sustained effort.

The initial learning community of 20–30 participants will read *Mind in the Making* over 10 weeks. They will attend five face-to-face dialogue sessions and four online chats in which they will reflect on their new knowledge and its impact on their practice. They will share their thoughts on the adults' learning process through video segments, organization newsletters, articles, and Facebook pages.

MnAEYC–MnSACA staff will create facilitator guides and participant guides for the online and face-to-face dialogues. Learning community members can also participate in asynchronous, online message-board conversations with other community members. They will be invited to share their discoveries in a panel discussion at the MnAEYC–MnSACA Annual Conference at the end of the 10-week period. This approach enables learning community members to take a long-term, sustained, and vibrant approach to learning across the early childhood years.

Another example comes from the American Center for Children and Media, based in Chicago, and Alice Wilder (head of research and development for *Blue's Clues* and co-creator of *Super Why*). The center created lessons around clips from popular children's television shows. The lessons focus on promoting children's life skills through two activities, and they conclude with a wrap-up activity. Teachers tested the lessons in classrooms in three child care programs in San Diego, California, with children primarily from Spanish-speaking families with low incomes. The teachers were excited to have research-based lesson plans with vocabulary and activity ideas around life skills essential to the children's success; the short, carefully chosen video clips were effective in reinforcing skills laid out in *Mind in the Making*.

6. Learning communities are not just using the curriculum they are handed—they are actively creating new curricula based on child and adult development.

Many learning communities begin by looking at the child development research in *Mind in the Making* and then observing programs for young children to see how they promote children's learning and development of life skills.

Campus Fun and Learn Child Development Center, at Rockland Community College in Suffern, New York, delivers year-round enrichment programs to children 6 weeks through 12 years old. The campus center offers programs for infants, toddlers, and 3- to 5-year-olds, and vacation and after-school care for school-age children. It is a registered UPK (universal prekindergarten) site supporting four school districts that serve diverse families, most with low incomes or a single parent.

Center director Kyle Miller and Debra Tietze, department chair for teacher education at Rockland Community College, see the child development center as the hub of a community conversation about creating a new family support system. *Mind in the Making* will provide a framework for discussing child development concepts and current brain research that are relevant and appropriate for teaching staff, families, undergraduate and graduate students, college faculty, and universal prekindergarten teachers from the surrounding community.

(cont'd on p. 26)



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The process will then cascade. Each stakeholder will share *Mind in the Making* knowledge parent to parent, teacher to parent, teacher to teacher, and finally family and teacher to children. The first year's work will conclude in April 2012, during the Month of the Young Child, with the Kiss Your Brain Festival.

7. Learning communities focus on assessment tied to children's development.

Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) is developing synergy between *Mind in the Making* and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) dimensions. LAUP reports that using MITM is the natural next step for this existing learning community, because the skills covered in the book and DVD relate to CLASS.

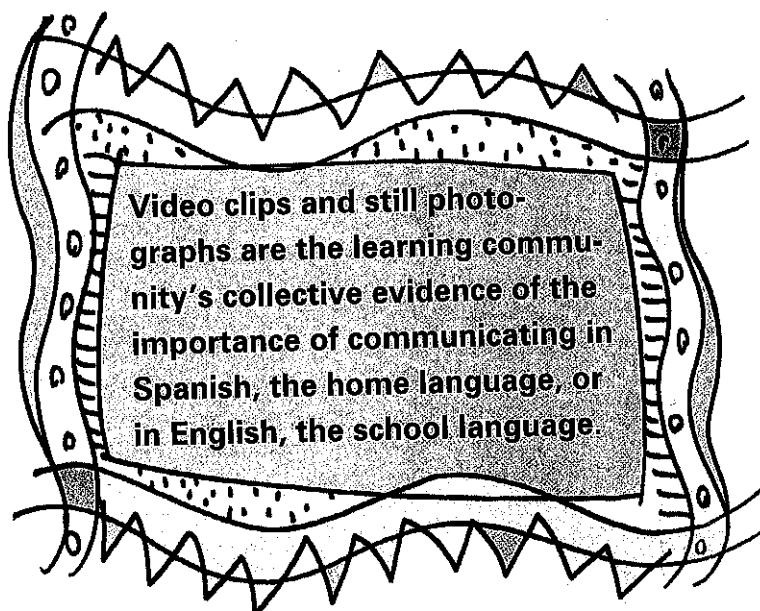
At monthly site visits, coaches will work with teaching staff (including assistant teachers who do not participate in the learning community) to identify at least one goal for their program based on practices and information discussed at the monthly learning community meeting. Teaching staff will also share the information with the families enrolled in the programs.

8. Learning communities are reframing teaching as teaching and learning.

The learning community at Kids' Corner Day Care Center, in Washington, D.C., prepares teachers and families to actively promote the skills children need to develop a love of learning and succeed in school and life. The group comprises parents (mostly Spanish speaking) and early childhood educators learning together using flip video cameras to capture children's listening, reading, and writing abilities and their use of oral language.

Members view, study, and discuss the videos. (The advantage of video is that it allows full participation regardless of a participant's proficiency in English or Spanish.) Video clips and still photographs are the learning community's collective evidence of the importance of communicating in Spanish, the home language, or in English, the school language.

At the learning community's first meeting, the facilitator, the center director, and other center staff gave a PowerPoint presentation about *Mind in the Making*. Then families and teachers viewed a few short clips taken at Kids' Corner that supported the presentation. In a subse-



quent session, staff shared videos about children learning through their five senses, honoring the importance of the children's home languages. Family members are excited about making connections between learning and teaching through observation and reflection, and they are enthusiastic about continuing the journey.

9. Learning communities connect policy to practice.

The Mayor's Office for Education and Children (MOEC) hosts the learning community in Denver, Colorado. MOEC identifies best practices and discusses how to implement them in early childhood programs and family, friend, and neighbor care settings. The office is creating a learning community with Spanish-speaking FFN child care providers who serve children in Denver's low-income communities, as well as interested Denver Great Kids Head Start teachers. The learning community uses *Mind in the Making* along with video clips from community meetings to inform and help create policy supported by MOEC. This process will result in a briefing paper, including effective strategies, policy recommendations, and changes needed. The learning community will track the resulting impact of MITM on school readiness and grade-level reading.

10. Learning communities continue—they have strategies to "pay it forward."

The mission of the Child Care Action Council (CCAC) of Olympia, Washington, is to promote and nurture early learning communities in which families and children can thrive. CCAC sees its work on the *Mind in the Making* learning community as an opportunity to inspire new learning and catalyze ongoing action throughout early childhood communities.

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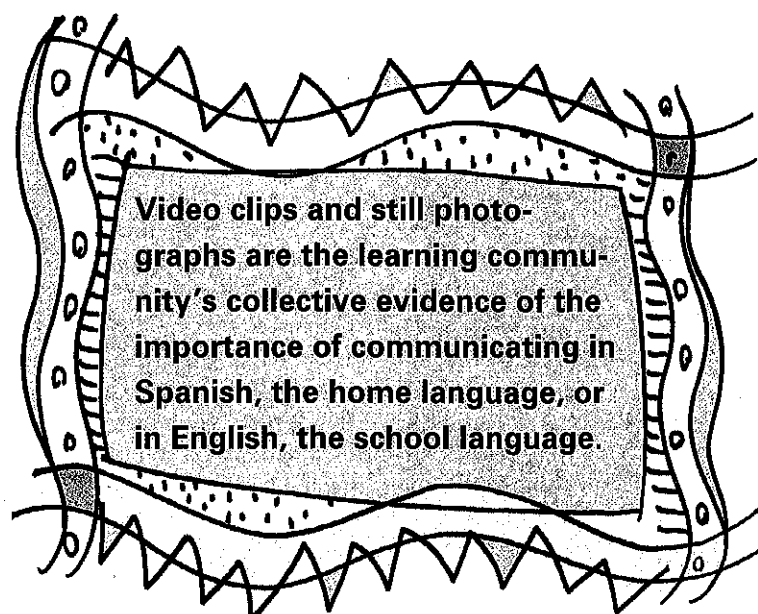
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CCAC plans to create presentations about *Mind in the Making*'s seven essential life skills for child care teachers, FFN caregivers, teen parent programs, parenting groups, and moms' groups, among others. For example, in partnership with the Thurston Early Childhood Coalition, the organization will create a social media strategy, "Building Brain Bits," that will be available on their website and shown in waiting rooms in doctors' offices and the welfare office, at WIC appointments, and such. Local early learning coalitions also plan early learning fairs to inform families about accessing services. Other CCAC and early learning coalition efforts will include providing a free preschool to Spanish-speaking parents, creating an early learning corner in a medical clinic that serves communities with low incomes, and giving away books and information at a variety of community events.

CCAC also reaches out to policy makers, such as county commissioners, city council members, and legislators. CCAC executive director Annie Cubberly reports, "Most of our partners are engaged for the long haul—partly because they need to be connected to resources, partly because we all like each other, and mostly because we all share the goal of improving the lives of young children in our communities."

Why learning communities, why now?

A session at NAEYC's 2011 National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development brought together a number of the groups just described that are developing learning communities around concepts in *Mind in the Making*. One of the questions we asked these participants was, "Why learning communities, why now?" Sharon Bergen reported that practitioners are very interested in sustained professional development that encourages a deep dive into content rather than surface-level exploration. The two Minnesota groups had been worried that a six-month time commitment would discourage participation; but instead, it is a selling feature.

Bergen found that practitioners are enthusiastic about the use of media in professional development—the video to be used during discussion of MITM and the learning community's use of the Internet. They see the learning community as supporting them in two ways: with new content

and with the use of technology as a professional development tool. The high-tech online environment is a boon rather than a barrier to participation.

Heather Vaughn said that learning communities help teachers who are often demoralized in a No Child Left Behind environment: "Participating in the groups enables teachers to use research to improve their teaching" and "it keeps their hearts in teaching!"

Recalling her days as director of the Early Childhood Institute in the US Department of Education, Naomi Karp said that trying to convince policy makers of things that we assume everyone understands, believes, and implements was the hardest part of the job: "The first time I saw [*Mind in the Making*], I literally got weepy because I knew the field now had a key that would begin to unlock the hearts and minds of so many gatekeepers who deny young children the learning environments they so desperately need and deserve—if (underscore if) we use the contents of the research in creative ways."

In *That Used to Be Us*, Friedman and Mandelbaum write that many of the solutions to help the United States regain what it has lost rise from the bottom up. Learning communities are just such a solution, arising from our past and renewed by new information and the use of new communication media. They remind me again and again that parents and teachers who continue to learn about children make the best parents and the best teachers.

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Assessing and Scaffolding Make-Believe Play

Deborah J. Leong and Elena Bodrova

It is the third week that Ms. Sotto's preschool classroom has been turned into an airport. The literacy center is a ticket counter, with a travel agency complete with child-made passports, tickets, and travel brochures. In the block area the children have constructed a walk-through X-ray scanner from cardboard boxes. A smaller box with openings on both ends functions as the screening device for carry-on luggage. There is an airplane cockpit made out of a big piece of cardboard with child-drawn instruments, an upside-down egg carton for a keyboard, and a paper plate that functions as the steering wheel.

Sophia tells her friend Vince that she is going on a trip and that she is going to forget to take out her water bottle. Then she won't be able to get through security. Vince says he is going to go to Puerto Rico where his grandmother lives. Sophia puts on her backpack and stands in line behind Vince. Finally it's her turn.

"Where are you going?" asks Tanya, the child behind the counter. "I'm goin' to Puerto Rico too." "OK. Here's your passport and your ticket to Puerto Rico. Your flight leaves at 7 o'clock." Tanya hands two pieces of torn construction paper to Sophia. Sophia goes to another center and takes off her shoes. She puts them in a basket with her backpack, then pushes the basket through the scanner. Amir, who is the security guard, waits until Sophia walks through the X-ray frame, then waves a paper towel roll wand over her head. "OK," he says, "you can go now." Another security guard, Milda, is standing with Sophia's backpack, holding the bottle of water that Sophia "forgot" to take out of her backpack. "This is more than three ounces!" "Oh, I forgot. I'll put it in my cubby," says Sophia as she takes the bottle and runs to her cubby. Her next stop is the passenger lounge.

What is happening in Ms. Sotto's classroom is an example of what most early childhood educators mean when they talk about make-believe play—a fantasy world created by children where their imagination soars, their language expands, and their social skills develop. Unfortunately, play observed in many early childhood classrooms

rarely reaches this level; often children act out a series of simple and stereotypical scripts with little or no interaction with their peers. Research provides more and more evidence of the positive effects that well-developed play has on various areas of child development, such as children's social skills, emerging mathematical ability, mastery of early literacy concepts, and self-regulation (see Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek 2006). It is also becoming increasingly clear that without adult support, the play of many children is destined to never reach this fully developed status. Teaching children to play has to be as intentional and

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systematic as teaching literacy or math and at the same time must take a form very different from adult-initiated practices often used to teach these content-related skills.

A Vygotskian approach to scaffolding play

True to the saying that everything new is the "well-forgotten old," the answer to today's challenges comes from the past—from theories of play developed in the last century by Lev Vygotsky and his student Daniel Elkonin. These theories, along with the work done by students of Vygotsky and Elkonin, are the foundation of the approach to scaffolding play we (the authors) currently use in our work with teachers in early childhood classrooms.

In Vygotsky (1977) and Elkonin's (2005) view, make-believe play reaches its highest level of development in the preschool and kindergarten years. However, this fully developed or "mature" form of play does not emerge overnight. In fact, its earliest prerequisites develop in infancy, as babies learn to imitate other people's actions and begin to communicate by using gestures and vocalizations. Mastering language and forming emotional bonds with their caregivers both prepare infants to learn from adults who are their first "play mentors." It is important to make sure that infants have ample opportunities to engage in playful interactions with adults during which they can practice their first pretend actions. In this sense a simple peek-a-boo game with an adult carries more educational value than any "smart toy" one gives to a child to play with alone.

Toddlers take more steps toward developing mature make-believe play as they move from mastering simple acts of putting on their clothes or brushing their hair to applying these acts to their dolls and stuffed animals; sometimes they even attempt to turn their pets into play partners. This is the time when adult play mentoring and—even better—toddler's participation in play with older children can change play

from being "toy oriented" to "people oriented." As Daniel Elkonin (1978, 187) put it, "A child starts with feeding herself with a spoon; then she uses the spoon to feed everyone; then she uses the spoon to feed her doll; and finally feeds the doll pretending to be the 'mommy' who feeds her 'daughter'" (trans. by Bodrova). At this later stage, the play is no longer about the spoon and not even about a specific doll—it is about the relationship between mother and daughter.

Reaching preschool age does not guarantee, however, that a child's play stops being toy oriented. In fact, too many preschoolers continue to engage in play that would be appropriate for a 2-year-old but is something that 4-year-olds should have long outgrown. To help teachers support higher levels of play in these children, we have developed an approach to assessing and scaffolding play—PROPELS—that focuses on its most critical elements (Bodrova & Leong 2007).

Minding one's p's and r's when playing

PROPELS is an acronym that stands for the most critical elements of children's play that can be assessed and scaffolded by the adults.

Plan—children's ability to think about play in advance of playing

Roles children play—including the actions, language, and emotional expressions that are associated with a specific role

Props—the objects (real, symbolic, and imaginary) children use in play

Extended time frame—play that lasts for long stretches of time: within one play session for an hour or longer or extending over several play sessions and over several days

Language—what children say to develop a scenario or coordinate the actions of different players as well as speech associated with a particular role

Scenario—what children act out, including the sequence of scripts and interactions between roles

Using PROPELS to assess play gives teachers an idea of how mature play is in their classrooms. On the continuum from most immature to most mature, children's make-believe play goes through five stages, with all of its elements (outlined above in the acronym PROPELS) developing and expanding:

- The earliest stage—first scripts—is best described in terms of object-oriented pretend actions, such as a child playing with toy cars while making "vroom-vroom" sounds.
- An example of the next stage—roles in action—would be a child walking back and forth in high heels and, when asked, labeling her actions as playing "mommy."

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- More mature play appears by stage 3—roles with rules and beginning scenarios. Children begin to coordinate their pretend actions with their play partners, making sure that these pretend actions go with the roles chosen by each of the players. When children are at this stage, it is common to hear them correcting each other's behaviors when the behaviors are not in line with the roles the children are playing. For example, a child might comment if the patient starts playing with the doctor's stethoscope or the sales associate walks off wearing shoes she was about to sell to a customer.

- An example of stage 4 play is found in the opening vignette describing the airport play in Ms. Sotto's room. Children engage in multiple pretend actions, all being consistent with the roles they are playing while acting out complex scenarios.

- Finally, at stage 5, planning and negotiating pretend actions starts to take more time than actually carrying them out. It is at this stage that children sometimes play multiple roles without actually having physical partners as they both "direct" and "act out" these roles with stuffed animals or even imaginary partners.

The table below summarizes the changes in the PROPELS elements across different stages of play.

What "PROPELS" play to new heights?

The idea that we need to teach young children how to play is not a new one; until recently, however, it has been primarily discussed in terms of enhancing or facilitating play that has already reached a certain level of develop-

Five Stages in a Child's Make-Believe Play

	1. First Scripts	2. Roles in Action	3. Roles with Rules and Beginning Scenarios	4. Mature Roles, Planned Scenarios, and Symbolic Props	5. Dramatization, Multiple Themes, Multiple Roles, and Director's Play
Plan	Does not plan during play.	Does not plan during play.	Plans roles; actions are named prior to play.	Plans each scenario in advance.	Plans elaborate themes, scenarios, and complex roles. Spends more time planning than acting out the scenario.
Roles	Does not have roles.	Acts first and then decides on roles. No rules are revealed.	Has roles with rules that can be violated.	Has complex, multiple roles.	Can play more than one role at a time. Roles have social relationships.
Props	Plays with objects as objects.	Plays with objects as props. Actions with a prop result in a role.	Needs a prop for the role.	Chooses symbolic and pretend props.	Can pretend rather than actually have a prop. Does not need a prop to stay in the role. Objects can have roles.
Extended time frame	Explores objects, but not play scenarios.	Creates scenarios that last a few minutes.	Creates scenarios that last 10–15 minutes.	Creates scenarios that last 60 minutes or longer. With support, can create scenarios that last over several days.	Creates scenarios that last all day and over several days. Play can be interrupted and restarted.
Language	Uses little language.	Uses language to describe actions.	Uses language to describe roles and actions.	Uses language to describe roles and actions. Uses role speech.	Uses language to delineate the scenario, roles, and action. Book language is incorporated into role speech.
Scenario	Does not create a scenario. Can copy what the teacher does and says or will follow the teacher's directions if script is simple and repetitive.	Creates a scenario that is stereotypical, with limited behaviors. Can incorporate modeled roles and actions into play, with support.	Plays familiar scripts fully. Accepts new script ideas.	Plays a series of coordinated scenarios that change in response to previous ones or the desires of players. Describes unfolding scenario, roles, and actions.	Plays a series of coordinated scenarios that change in response to previous ones or the desires of players. Uses themes from stories and literature.

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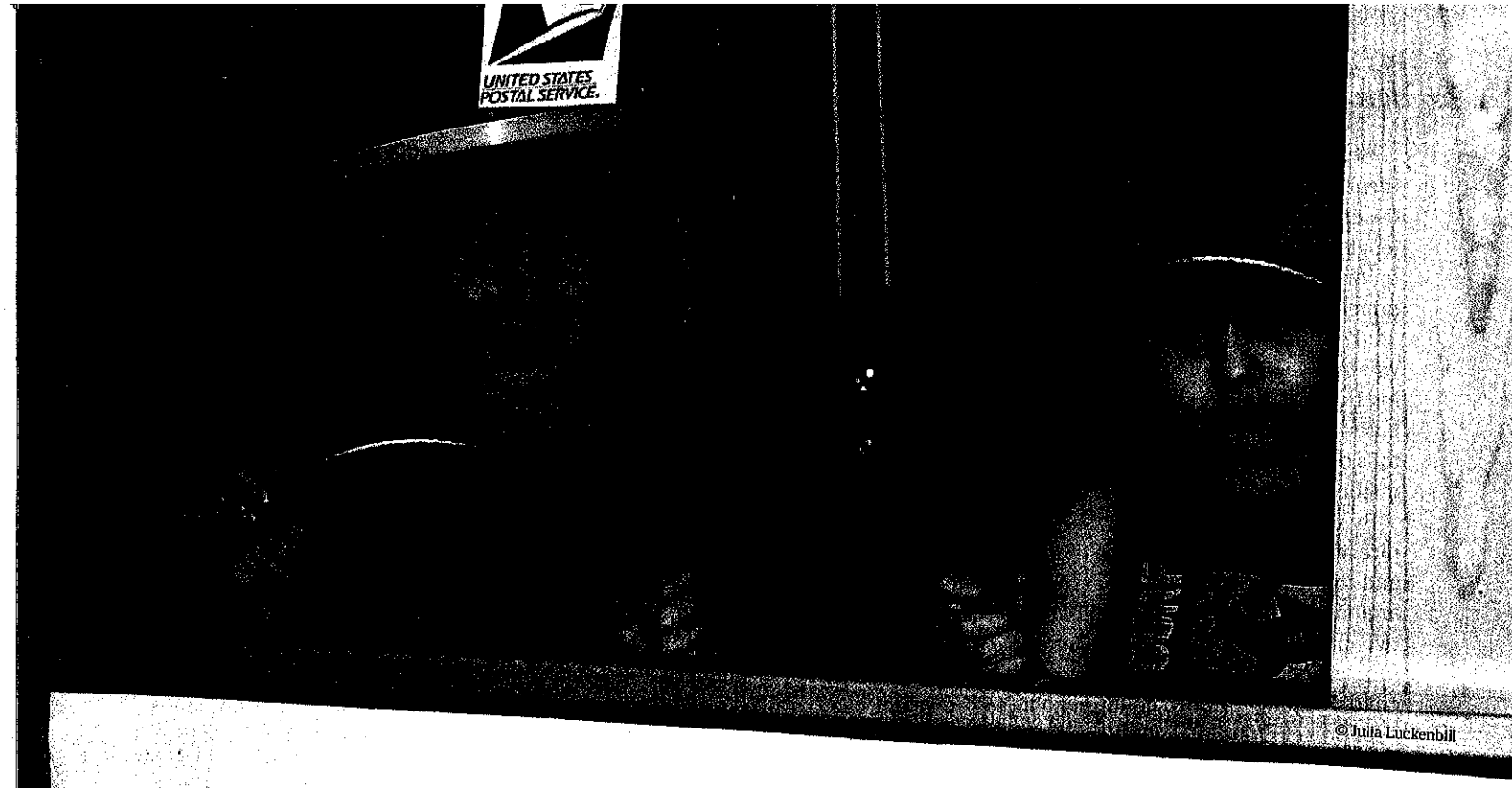
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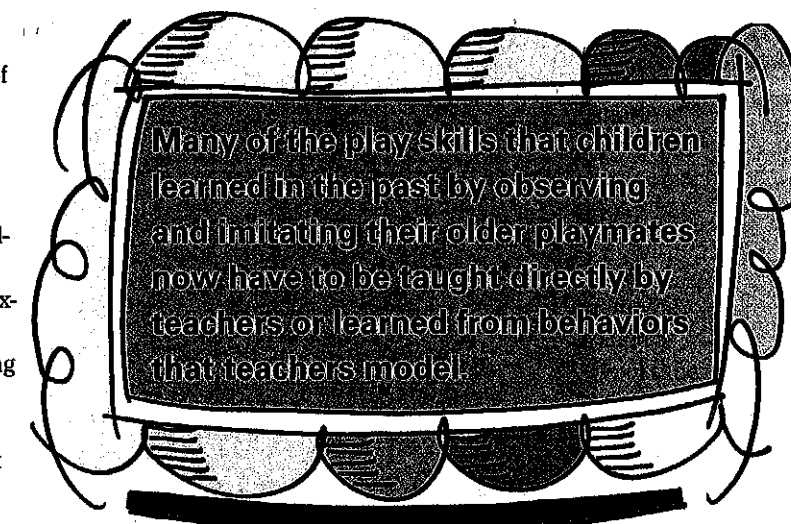


ment. Explicit play instruction is often limited to the context of special education. While children with language delays or emotional disorders are thought to benefit from play interventions, children without such delays or disorders are usually expected to develop play skills on their own. This approach, while valid in the past, can no longer be adopted if we want all young children to develop mature play. Massive changes in the culture of childhood—such as the disappearance of multiage play groups, the increase in time children spend in adult-directed activities after school, and so on—mean that, for many young children, early childhood settings are the only place where they have the opportunity to learn how to play.

It is important to note, however, that learning how to play in the classroom will not look the same as learning to play within the informal neighborhood peer groups of yesterday. In the past, most play occurred in multiage groups in which younger children could learn from older "play experts," practice their play skills with peers of the same age, and then pass their knowledge on to other "play novices." Under those conditions, even preschoolers could act out elaborate and imaginative scenarios like castles or space travel, because the play skills of older children would buoy their own skills. In today's early childhood settings, children are almost always segregated by age and have to interact with play partners who are as inexperienced as they are. As a result, many of the play skills that children learned in the past by observing and imitating their older playmates now have to be taught directly by teachers or learned from behaviors that teachers model.

In addition, unlike the unstructured play of the past that often lasted for hours or days, playtime in today's early childhood classroom is limited and rarely exceeds one or

two hours. This means that to achieve rapid progress in the quality of play, play scaffolding in the classroom needs to be designed to strategically target its most critical components: children's play Planning, their ability to take on and maintain Roles, use of Props, Extended time frame, children's use of Language, and the quality of play Scenarios. In mature play, all of these discrete components are intertwined. However, we have found that at different levels of play, children will have more difficulty with one aspect or another. Using PROPELS is best when you first observe children's play without intervening. After assessing the level of children's independent play, you can then decide what kind of scaffolding is the most appropriate. By highlighting the different areas in which you as the teacher can scaffold, you can be more efficient in providing scaffolds that support a given child or group of children.



Scaffolding children's play Planning. Elkonin (1978) identified planning as one of the features of mature play, describing play of older children as consisting mostly of lengthy discussions of who is going to do what and how, followed by brief periods of acting out. As with other components of play, role and scenario planning can benefit from adult scaffolding. The teacher can start by asking children what they want to play or what they want to be, encouraging them to discuss the choice of the roles with their peers. Later, the teacher can ask children about more specific details of their future play scenarios, including what props they might need or whether they need to assume a different role.

By making planning a necessary step in play, the teacher directs children's attention to the specifics of their roles and to the existence of rules associated with them. Many arguments that happen during play are over the fact that two children have chosen the same role or because the prop associated with that role is being used by another child. Planning prior to children going to the center can help prevent potential conflicts. Children can talk about the

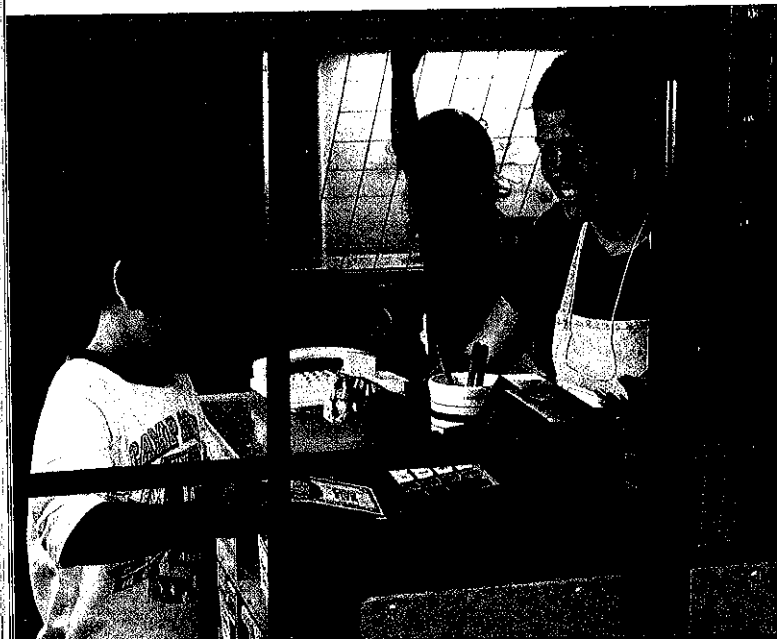
possible conflict instead of fighting over the prop. Planning allows children to discuss what might happen if there are two people who want to be truck drivers and only one truck. Having children agree to take turns before going to the center teaches social problem-solving strategies and starts the play off with positive interactions.

The planning process can take place orally, but if children represent their plans in drawing or pretend writing, this process produces even greater benefits. First, as children engage in drawing, they are able to focus on their future play for a longer period of time, thus thinking over more details of their pretend scenarios. Second, having a tangible reminder helps children to regulate their own and their partners' behaviors; if a child has a picture of a veterinarian with her name on it, it becomes harder for another child to usurp this role. It also makes it easier for the teacher to troubleshoot possible conflicts and to engage children in brainstorming solutions. If two children want to be veterinarians, the teacher can introduce different kinds of veterinarians, such as the ones who take care of pets and those who treat large animals.

Planning also occurs during play when children change the scenario, the props, and the roles. Mature players discuss what is going to happen prior to it happening. For example, children might discuss what will happen at the fire station now that the fire is out. What other problems might happen? Children at the higher levels of play are able to plan on the fly, discuss possible directions for the scenarios, incorporate the ideas of the different players involved, and create props to match the changes in the play.

Scaffolding development and maintaining play Roles and rules. As Elkonin (1978) points out, the focus of mature

play is the social roles and relationship between people—something that children cannot learn by simply observing adult behaviors. Therefore, to promote mature play, teachers need to explain the purpose of these behaviors, their sequence, the cause-and-effect relationships between different behaviors, and so on. For example, a teacher may explain that a customer in a restaurant cannot simply go to the kitchen and get a pizza—first he needs to give his order to a waiter. The waiter will take the order to a chef, and only



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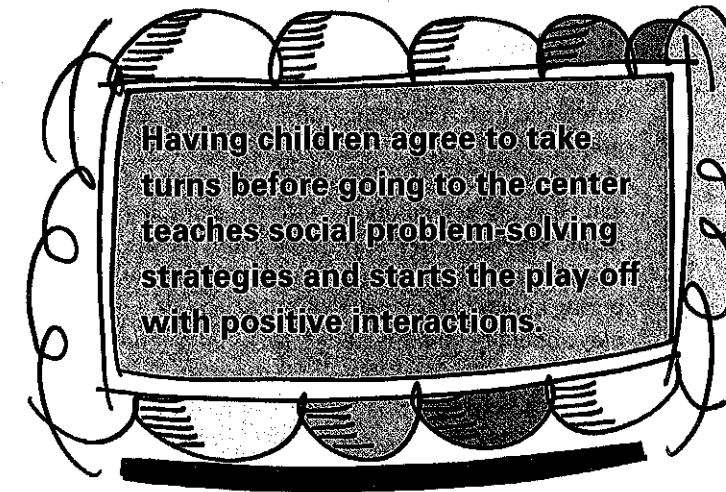
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then will the customer be served the pizza. It also helps to discuss with the children what happens if the normal sequence of events gets disrupted; a chef who has not waited for the waiter to bring him a specific order may cook something different from what the customer wants to eat.

The rules that hold make-believe play together are not arbitrary but are based on the logic of real-life situations. Therefore, not knowing how these life scripts unfold will keep children from practicing self-regulated behaviors by following these rules. Helping children learn about scripts, and the rules that these scripts follow, calls for greater involvement by early childhood teachers in children's play than most teachers are used to. However, for most children this involvement needs to last for a relatively short time: soon they are able to use models provided by the teachers to build their own roles and rules, requiring only occasional adult support.

Scaffolding the use of Props in a symbolic way. Many young children today grow up using mostly realistic toys and having limited or no experience with using open-ended materials (for example, a rock, stick, or paper plate) in play. This makes it difficult for them to develop a broad range of symbolic substitutions associated with higher levels of make-believe play. For these children, teachers need to model how to use props in a symbolic way, gradually expanding the repertoire of different uses for the same object. Over the period of several months, teachers can introduce more unstructured and multifunctional props while at the same time removing some overly realistic ones, such as plastic fried eggs. Older preschoolers and kindergartners can start making their own props, while teachers can show younger preschoolers how to make minimal changes in the existing props to change their purpose. For example, a teacher can say, "Look at this big toy dog. We used it as the Big Bad Wolf when we played fairy tales. Do you think we can use it as the dalmatian in the fire station

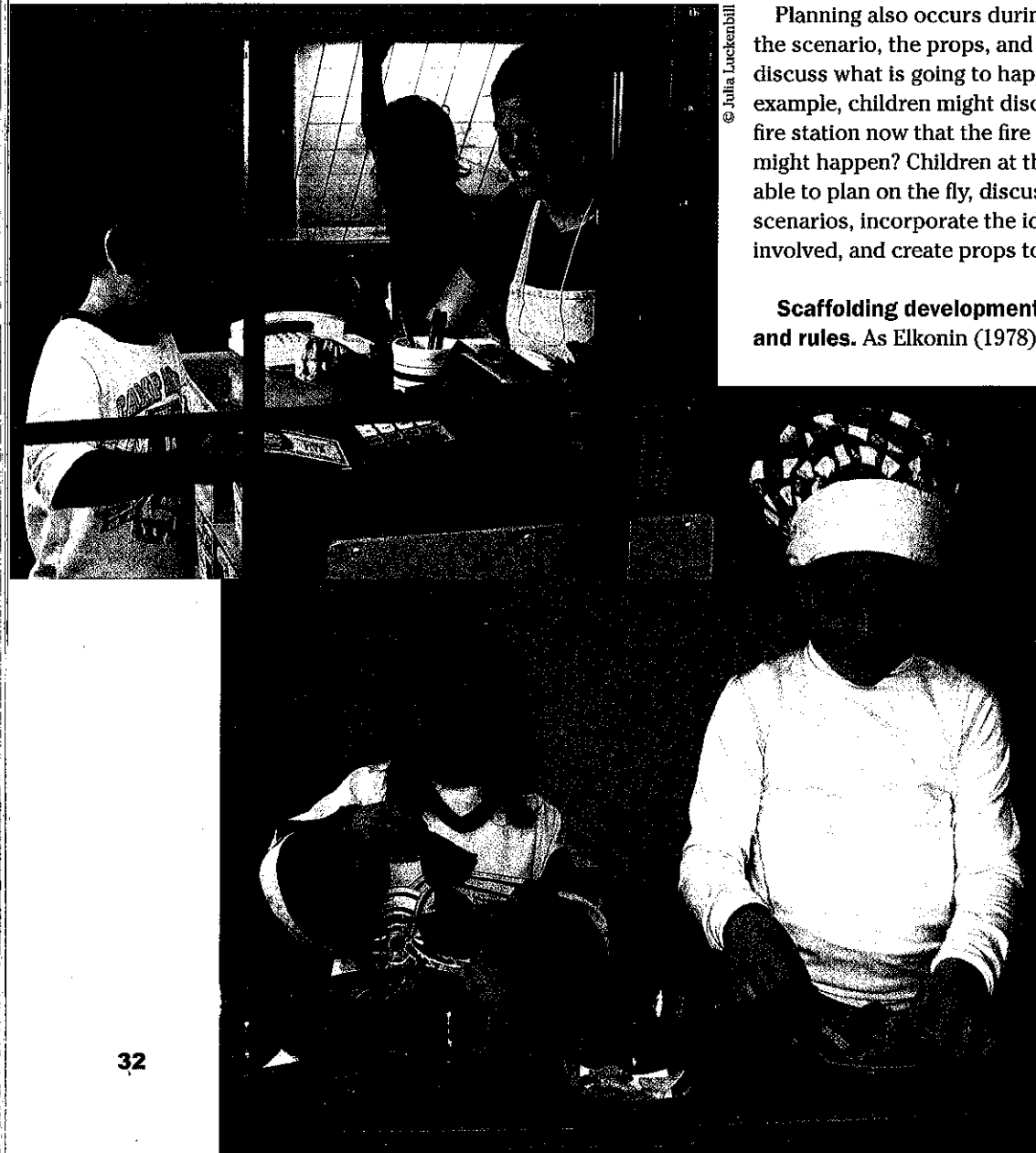
we are building now? What can we do to make this dog look like a dalmatian?"

Scaffolding the use of Language in play. An important part of adult scaffolding is monitoring children's language to make sure it is used in the service of play. For example, an adult's language should change to match the new ways props are used: the same paper plate that is a steering wheel in a fire truck today was a pretend pizza in the play restaurant last week. Since the appearance of the prop has not changed, the new name given to the paper plate is the only way the players will know that now it is being used in a new way. Assigning new names to the play props as these are used in new functions helps children master the symbolic nature of words, leading to children's eventual realization of the unique relationship that exists between words and the objects they signify. This emergence of meta-linguistic awareness is associated with children's mastery of written language.

Language also touches some of the other elements of play described in PROPELS. Adult scaffolding is needed to help children engage in "role speech," that is, using vocabulary, sentence structure, and intonation that fit a specific role. Teachers first introduce children to the ways people doing different jobs talk to each other during book reading or on a field trip. For example, children would learn that a 911 operator tries to reassure the person calling that the fire truck will arrive soon by saying, "Help is on the way." As the play unfolds, children may also need to be reminded of new vocabulary words they can use when playing a particular role. One way to do this is for a teacher to temporarily assume a secondary role, such as a customer or a patient, and make requests that prompt the children playing the leading roles of chefs, doctors, or vets to use these new words. For example, if the play in the pretend restaurant gets a little stale, a teacher can freshen it up by pretending to place a call to make a reservation. This would be a perfect opportunity to inquire about today's specials, the hours when the restaurant is open, whether kids' meals are available, and so on.

Scaffolding development of play Scenarios that can unfold over Extended periods of time. A play scenario is what many people call the theme of play. It is the story line that the children are acting out. Children explore the social interactions of their roles through the play scenario. What happens when you go to the doctor's office? Your baby might be sick or you might have a broken leg. What will you say to the doctor? What will he or she do to help you? Mature players have scenarios that evolve and change as they play, hence the importance of extended periods of time.

Scaffolding play scenarios has several components. First, children often lack background knowledge to build their scenarios. Even to play "family dinner" or "grocery store,"





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Conclusion

Mature make-believe play is an important and unique context, providing opportunities to learn not afforded by other classroom activities. It should not be considered something extra that can be cut to accommodate more time for academic skills, nor should it be used as a means of adding "entertainment value" for inherently boring and decontextualized drills. Instead, play should be preserved and nurtured as one of the "uniquely 'preschool'" (in the words of Vygotsky's colleague and student Alexander Zaporozhets) activities that provide the most beneficial context for children's development:

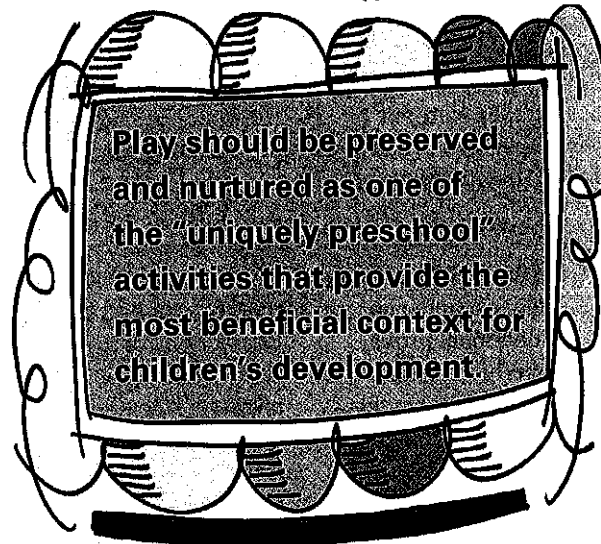
Optimal educational opportunities for a young child to reach his or her potential and to develop in a harmonious fashion are not created by accelerated ultra-early instruction aimed at shortening

the childhood period—that would prematurely turn a toddler into a preschooler and a preschooler into a first-grader. What is needed is just the opposite—expansion and enrichment of the content in the activities that are uniquely "preschool": from play to painting to interactions with peers and adults. (Zaporozhets 1986, 88)

which all children are expected to be familiar with, requires knowledge of the setting, roles, and actions associated with these scenarios. To build background knowledge about less familiar topics, teachers use field trips, guest speakers, and books and videos. To promote mature play, the choice of places to take children on a field trip and the choice of books and videos need to be guided by how well these activities and tools will help children to learn about people and their activities.

When field trips or books center on objects or animals, such as a trip to the zoo or a book on dinosaurs, very little of their content gets reenacted in mature make-believe play. However, if a teacher supplements a book on dinosaurs with additional videos and books portraying the work of paleontologists, children are more likely to start playing pretend scenarios, such as museum or dinosaur dig, and incorporate new concepts in their conversations.

Sometimes even a very successful field trip may not provide enough information for children to transfer what they saw on this trip to their play in the classroom. In these cases teachers have to support play by modeling pretend actions and role speech more explicitly, for example, role-playing and practicing some of the pretend actions with children. For most children such intensive "play practice" is needed for only a limited time. Other children, such as children with special needs, can benefit from more extensive play practice with their peers.



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